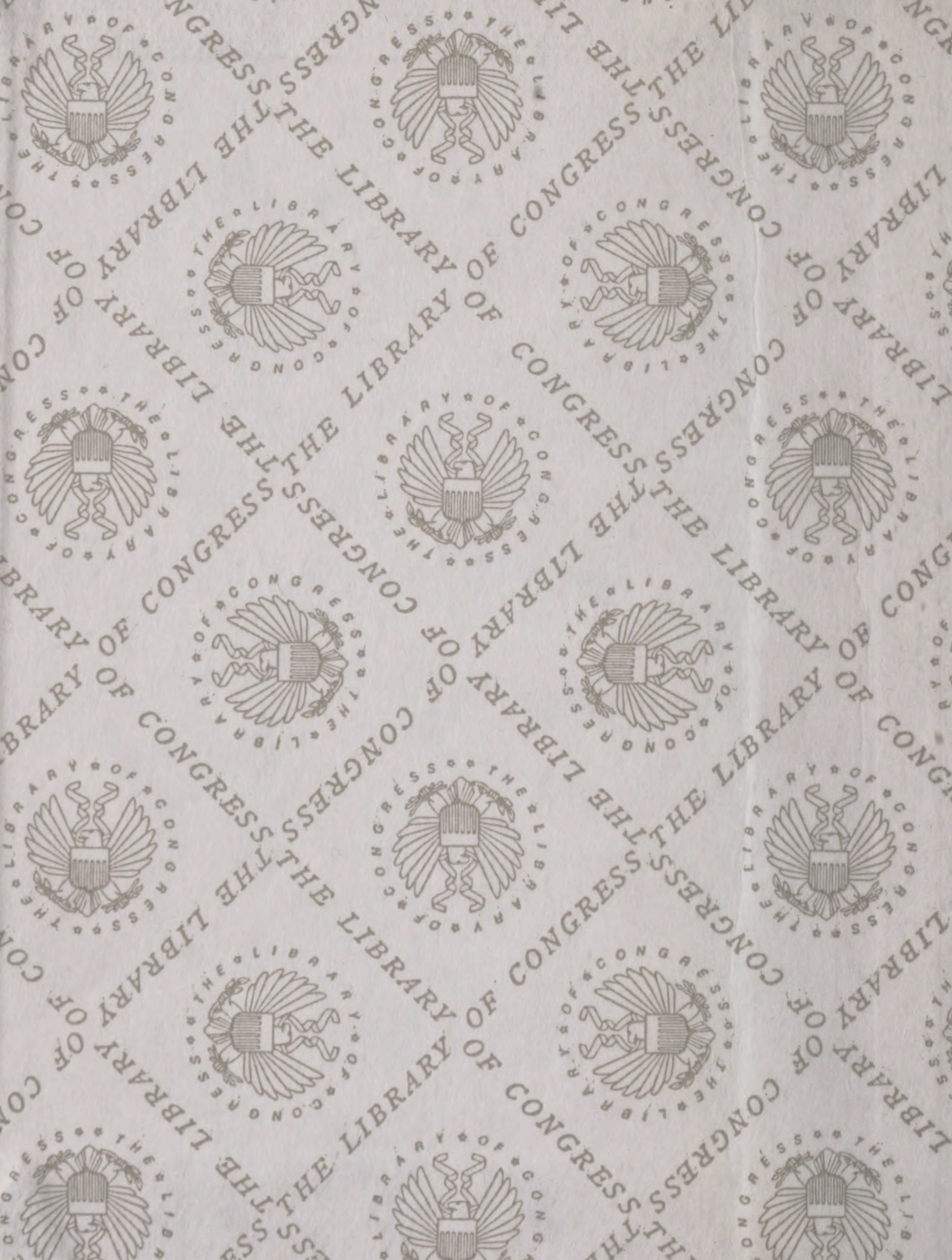


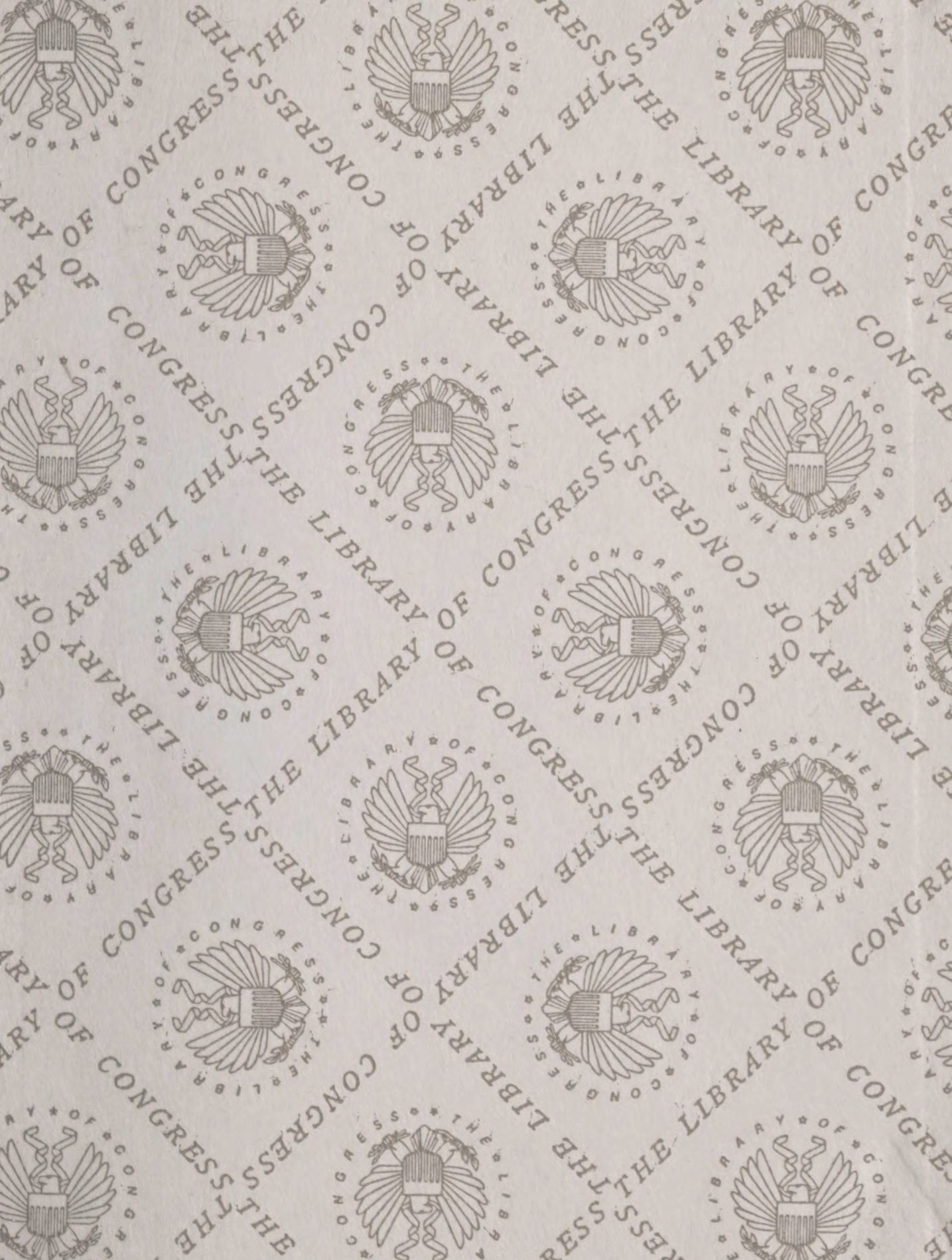
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SKIDD'S • BRANCH,

A TALE OF
THE KENTUCKY MOUNTAINS.

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BY MARION STUART CANN.



PRINTED AT THE REPUBLICAN JOB ROOMS,
SCRANTON, PA.

1884.

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TO

William A. Newhall, jr.,

WHOSE SINCERE FRIENDSHIP WILL EVER BE THE
MOST CHERISHED AMONG A HOST OF PLEASANT
KENTUCKY MEMORIES, THIS TALE IS AFFECTION-
ATELY INSCRIBED BY

THE AUTHOR.

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ON SKIDD'S BRANCH,

—A TALE OF—

THE KENTUCKY MOUNTAINS.

CHAPTER I.

AT JOHN AMBURST'S MILL.

There is a deep, narrow gorge between the hills, where Skidd's Branch empties into the Chatter; and the yellow rock, that underlies the mountains, has been shattered by convulsive sighs which heaved the earth's bosom years ago. Amid the jagged rocks, wrought into a thousand shapes by the whimsicalities of centuries' storms, the two streams mingle, and thick forest, dark, fern-bound glens and trailing vines that now clutch some sharp horn of the sandstone, and now cling by some fantastic root, coiling and delving wherever a crevice gives passage to its fibres, watch over the meeting waters.

Here the transient February sun touches the hills with purple, and the heaven-born

arbutus, lifts its pure petals amid the snow; and here, too, the sweet bud swells, and later on, the rhododendron offers nectar to the gods from its chalice of blushing innocence; and, still later, the fox grapes, purple in the autumnal sun until winter reaps the vintage amid the rock-bound desolation of the hills.

Just why John Amburst should build a mill here, nobody ever knew. To be sure, there was arable land in the sparsely settled bottoms across the river, but nobody had ever thought of raising corn there. The nearest neighbor, who lived ten miles back from "the Branch," allowed of the mill, that "there wan't no use fur it." Nor as a matter of fact, did there seem to be; for during five months of the year "Skidd's Branch" only existed through courtesy, for three months it was "most ways froze up," and the rest of the time, so subject was it to the sudden rises of spring and fall, that milling was very uncertain.

These facts, well attested as they were, did not seem to deter John Amburst in the least; nor was he influenced by the protests of such of the mountaineers as came his way. In that simple directness which belongs to

men of his type, he remarked to Bill Skyles, the logger, that "he guessed he knowed his own biz," and, as Skyles had nothing with him but an ax, he acquiesced to the proposition, and the building of the mill went on.

It was not an elaborate structure, this mill of John Amburst; but in those early days it was considered a marvel of ingenuity, because of both its architectural and mechanical simplicity.

Its builder selected a spot where he could get a fall of ten feet to the river, and there laid his foundation of rough stone from the branch.

Then he scored the rafters and framed in the mill.

The dam was next built. It was a crib of logs and sandstone rubble, and, later on, the unresting wheel was put in place, and throwing out its diamond jets of water, it sent the saw teeth through the great chestnut logs. The mill was closed in, and the stone attuned its whirr to the fret of the saw. To this primitive machinery was added a rude "hand bolter," and then, as John Amburst was able both to crack the corn, and reduce it to

a coarse meal, the exigencies of milling in the Kentucky mountains were met.

All this was twenty years ago, and the mill and the miller's house have both long since lost their fresh wood color; moss has grown on their roofs, and the rough hewn timbers have been alternately bleached with the summer sun and grayed by the winter flaw.

From his advent at the "Branch," few men were on good terms with John Amburst; and, so it was that for many years, whispers went around that he was not dependent upon the mill alone for a living. But, if he had other resources, it never appeared to slack his industry; nor did it ever seem that he had ulterior motives in building his mill in so desolate a spot as the mouth of Skidd's Branch.

Then there was no Mrs. Amburst—only Polly. To be sure she lived to all intents and purposes as Mrs. Amburst; but she was only Polly, after all, and the neighborhood knew it. But whatever shock this may have given to the community—if neighbors living ten and twelve miles apart, and seeing one another once a fortnight can be called a community—had died away long ago so that gossip awoke afresh, when Helen Amburst came on the

scene. She was unlike many of the mountain lassies, both in beauty and bearing. To use the verdict of Bill Skyles, who has become an oracle since the mill was built, she was "too rich for his blood."

John Amburst said that since her birth she had been living with an aunt; the girl said nothing. She seemed melancholy, and soon looked frail as the delicate anemones that grew on the cliffs above the old mill. He frowned down all inquiring looks, and kept her under rigid surveillance, and thus it was that, after she had been there a few months, gossip died out; though her presence and personnel always wooed speculation among the miller's customers.

Such, in brief, is the story of the mill up to the time when Edward Darnley came up the bridle-path, along the frozen Chatter, and knocked at the rude, weather-beaten, oaken door. Amburst opened it, and received the stranger with a show of hospitality. He was accustomed to entertain whatever wayfarer might find his house. The young man's calm, gray eyes seemed to light with a speculative ray, as he told Amburst how he was looking for timber tracts; and whether the latter was

satisfied with the scrutinizing glance he gave, or whether his curiosity needed other opportunities for satisfaction, it would have been hard to read, in the rough greeting he gave, as he brought in Darnley's saddle bags, and led his horse to the barn.

This was while the snows were deep, and the Branch was a roadway to the logging camps, where the sturdy mountaineers had been chopping for three months of hard winter weather. Darnley visited all of these and studied the geography of the region until he could dispense with the services of John Amburst; a fact which deprived that worthy of a dollar a day guide fees, and much apparent satisfaction.

During these latter days, however, the young man had been occupied indoors, ostensibly writing contracts, a work which kept him near Helen, in front of the fire in the wide chimney. Polly 'low'd he writ mos' as powerful slow as the gal peeled taters," a simile over which both smiled and looked conscious. But this was only before Polly, who was too little accustomed to young people to understand how much they said in a few words.

With John Amburst, it was different. Before him they looked little and said less.

During the week that had elapsed since he dispensed with John Amburst as a guide, Darnley had noticed one peculiarity in his host's behavior. Whenever the young man remained at the mill, Amburst did the same; when he returned at evening, his horse worn with a hard day's travel, Amburst came back a little later with his horse in the same condition. Once, when Darnley had started out for the day, he was taken sick, and came back before noon; Amburst returned also, yet neither spoke of the coincidence.

The cold snap had moderated during the past two days, and, as the light faded from the hills Darnley stood in front of the mill smoking.

"Ther's goin' to be er thawr," said Amburst coming up.

"It looks so, and I think I will go day after to-morrow, if we don't have a freshet."

"Have yer found out what yer come fur?" asked Amburst significantly.

"I think I have."

"Yes, yer've been to *all* the camps hain't

yer? I reckon yer have," and after closely watching the effect of his words, the miller gave his guest a malevolent frown, and went into the house.

When Darnley turned, he saw Helen standing in the door, and her face bore a look of anxiety. As she answered his salutation, he noticed a constraint in her manner, which was not habitual, and when she spoke, her voice trembled with concealed emotion.

That night he vainly wooed sleep. During the evening he had been unable to fathom the change in Helen's manner, which he fancied would have been tenderly pathetic, had not the presence of a third person restrained them both. Something in the girl's troubled look kept him pondering, until long after the house was quiet.

Toward morning, he dropped into a fitful slumber that was disturbed by dreams oppressive with that awful, undefined dread which, though accompanied with the consciousness that it is but a nightmare, sends cold sweat to the brow, and leaves the strongest of us unnerved. From such a dream he awoke with a start. It was intense-

ly dark, and he was filled with a presentiment of evil.

A stealthy step was sounding in the room below. Darnley heard it approaching the foot of the rude half ladder that led up to the loft, where he lay. Then came foot falls on the staircase, and, in the darkness, he felt the presence of some one in the loft.

Outside were the voices of the night. The wind sighed through gaunt trees, and branches creaked against the roof. He strained his eyeballs to pierce the blackness, and thought he could distinguish a still blacker mass that was moving toward him. The regular breathing of the sleepers below was audible, as was, too, the beating of his own heart, yet the silence was oppressive.

All at once there was a cough in the room below; it was Helen's voice; he knew it.

Another, and still another followed, and the noise relieved the stillness.

It did more; he saw the crouching figure, which had become more distinct, as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, slowly retreat to the ladder; and then there came a faint, care muffled step, and the mass of shad-

ow disappeared into the deeper blackness that surrounded the rude stairway.

Morning dawned dark and lowering. Heavy leaden clouds hung low over the hill tops, and the air was damp and murky.

When Darnley descended, breakfast was ready, and John Amburst stood with his back to the fire, to nod a grim good morning, to his visitor. Darnley sat in front of the blaze after the meal was dispatched. Helen was near him; after a moment she took a letter from her bosom.

"Here is something you dropped, Mr. Darnley," she said, handing it.

He thanked her, and was about to put it in his pocket when an almost imperceptible look from the girl arrested his uplifted hand. He glanced at Helen; her eyes were fixed on the envelope, and instinctively, his sought the same object.

On the back of the letter were written the words: "Go Home."

As he gazed at her in mute inquiry, the girl clasped her hands as if imploring him to flee, and her look of apprehension told him of some impending danger. In a few seconds he

comprehended her meaning. The answer which his questions of the night before had failed to elicit had come; and half an hour later his bill was paid and he was saying "good-bye."

Helen gave him her hand, and, in the warm pressure, which accompanied his conventional thanks for her kindness, she read his real thanks—perhaps more.

Then he went away.

John Amburst had viewed the young man's departure with evident displeasure; and ten minutes after Darnley's horse had gone up the ravine, he took his gun from its place, scaled the cliff by a ragged path, and disappeared in the undergrowth.

Helen watched him from the door; her face was shaded with a look of apprehension.

When the tangled laurel that overhung the cliff's brow hid the miller's form from view, she turned her eyes slowly down the Branch, and saw a man approaching. He was a tall, well made fellow of about twenty five, and his lithe figure and erect carriage gave one an impression of courage, so that, in spite of his rough suit of coarse jeans, he was not unimposing.

As he came up to the mill door, he rested his gun against the lintel with a familiar "Howde."

"How do you do, Connie?" answered Helen.

"Oh, middlin'. I reckoned yer'd be with that 'ere city chap; whar is he?"

"He has gone."

"I 'low'd he'd stay till the thaw anyway."

"I feared he would, myself." Helen unconsciously put an accent on the word that made her color slightly. Connie interpreted it as a favorable sign and continued more warmly:

"You'd a felt bad, if you'd a know'd how I war longin' fur to see you alone agin. I was skeered that yer mought be so taken up with him you'd forgit one o' yer friends."

"No, Connie, believe me, I shall never forget you, you have been too kind for that."

The young mountaineer's face glowed with pleasure, as he took the white hand she held out.

For a moment the girl was deep in thought, and her large hazel eyes had a far-away look, then they lighted with resolution as she said,

"Now I have one more favor to ask, will you do it?"

"That I will "

She looked keenly into his face for a moment to see if he were deceiving her, then she said: "Go up the ravine as fast as you can, and tell Mr. Darnley to come back and go down by the river. He will never get through up there. Tell him I said so, and, Connie, not a word to anybody."

"What fur?" he questioned in a tone that implied both surprise at the request, and somewhat of pique that she betrayed so much anxiety concerning the stranger.

"Because you are my friend." The soft eyes were pleading now; and, yet so trustful in their appealing that the young man was reassured.

Without another word Connie took his gun and walked rapidly up the ravine. As he went, he pondered over the errand that the girl had given him.

"She don't want no harm to come to him anyway," he thought. "I don't see no cause fur her bein' skeert, but there shan't, no how, not if I kin help it. No, sir, jes fur her sake."

With this in his mind, he pressed up the branch.

Meanwhile Darnley had left the ravine, and was trying to make a short cut over the mountain. The events of the night before were in his mind, and, though only half suspecting the real facts, after Helen's mute though impassioned warning, he felt that the more distance he put between the mill and himself, the better. He distrusted the propriety of pursuing the route which he had announced to the miller would be his, and forcing his horse to struggle up a steep and broken path that led toward the rough table-land that shut in the ravine, sought for a short cut over the hills that loomed up in the misty west.

The wood was filled with underbrush and trailing vines tangled the laurel among fallen logs and slippery rocks, half concealed in the drifted snow; and, as the trail that led to the Shiner was concealed, his progress was very slow. Moreover, it had now commenced to rain, and the mist that rose with the sudden change of temperature confused him even more. Thus wet and bewildered, he lost his way; and after two or three hours of vain en-

deavor, gave up all hope of shortening his journey, and devoted his energies to once more finding the ravine road that he had abandoned earlier in the day.

Thus it was that Helen's plan, and Connie's effort, to bear her message were baffled. The latter had hurried up the ravine for several miles, but found no trace of Darnley, and, unable to execute his commission, had passed on his way hours before the object of his search led his horse down the path into the ravine once more, and, mounting the weary animal, struck toward the head of the Big Slew.

The rain now poured in torrents and ragged clouds hung over the brows of the sand stone cliffs that walled in the Slew. The ravine was scarcely a hundred feet wide, and at either base of its steep walls was heaped a jagged talus of shattered rock that had been separated by the frosts of countless winters. These varied in size from that of a stage coach to a man's head, and had been wrought into all sorts of curious shapes by the action of the water that flowed through this drain from the higher levels to the southwest. But now the identity of these masses was lost by the drifts

of snow that had buried them for three months, and only here and there jutted irregular points above the earth yellowed mass that was slowly disappearing under the warm rain.

The bottom of the Slew was covered with muddy water that increased in volume every minute. Even now, following the rapid descent of the gulley that in summer contained but a tiny thread of trickling moisture, the spring tide was murmuring threats of a mountain torrent, and the turbid waters dashed over the fetlocks of Darnley's horse, as the animal picked his way among the projecting rocks.

The rain fell still faster and the air became more charged with mist. A curtain of fog fell to the bottom of the ravine but a few feet ahead, and the water poured out from the melting snow, as if it had been squeezed like a sponge.

Above the roar of the rain and the hoarse gurgle of the torrent that was now up to the horse's knees, he heard the dull crash of falling trees and the loosening of masses of ice and rock from the escarpment of the cliffs above—now deadened by distance, now close at hand. From every seam of the yellowish rocks came

streams of dirty water, and the snow sank away between the rubble that bounded the pass.

A mass of ice and snow, that bore on its soiled bosom, branches and fragments of bark, tumbled into the chasm a few feet ahead of Darnley, and his horse wheeled in fright so suddenly that its rider was thrown clear of the animal, which slipped to its knees among the rocks.

This simple accident probably saved his life.

As Darnley's head went down, there blazed from the mist ahead, a sheet of flame, and a bullet whistled harmlessly over the prostrate man, and flattened itself against the cliff.

In an instant Darnley recovered his feet; and, drawing his pistol and firing a single shot at the figure dimly outlined in the mist, he retreated hastily through the rising waters.

His assailant did not follow, but disappeared in an angle of the rock.

Darnley's flight was not by any means an easy one. Toward the foot of the Slew the torrent was now waist deep, and he was driven to the rubble at the base of the cliffs for a footing, where with much difficulty he managed to pick his way, from rock to rock, until

by four o'clock, he had reached the mouth of the ravine, and stood on the banks of the swoolen creek into which it emptied.

To cross was impossible, for the narrow stream was swift as a mill race; yet to remain was equally unsafe.

After a moment's survey of the boiling branch, he plunged into the inundated underbrush that fringed the narrow strip of bank between the creek and the cliff, and struggled toward its head waters in hope of a ford.

CHAPTER II.

THE CROW'S NEST.

From the point where Skidd's Branch empties into the river, for twenty miles back, there is a constant succession of bold, much eroded hills, connected by narrow plateaux, which are ravined with canyons like the one just described. The hills themselves are quite steep and at the top there is frequently a ridge scarcely wide enough for a mountain road. Furthermore these ridges run in every possible direction, and, hence it is, that the ravines which form the drainage of the country, undergo all sorts of turnings and windings.

These gorges, are, for the most part, in sandstone, which resists the disintegrating influences of frost and water but slightly; but rarely, the cave limestone, which forms the lower member of the rock group here, is cut into, and, in such instances, most singular formations are the result. The shelving cliffs of sandstone that shut in the narrow winding passages for a mile or two, disappear and the ravine expands into an amphitheatre of precipitous gray lime rock, at the base of which is the mouth of some subterranean stream that has its origin in the sink holes on the forest-covered plateau bounding the chasm. The ravines have been worn by the water from these subterranean streams during centuries, and as they have gradually deepened have left the caves superposed like the stories of a house; the openings that once served as the outlet for the waters, now being many feet above the bottom of the ravine. Where these streams have cut deep beds, too, the rocks are overgrown with evergreen trees and shrubs. Spruce, pine, and holly, mingle with the hickory, poplar, gum and ash; laurel and rhododendrons thrust their twisted branches amid the larger growths, and ivy, running-

oak and vines bind the whole into a thicket that is almost impenetrable.

Facing such a chasm was the Crow's Nest. The main opening to the cave was about fifty feet above the bottom of the ravine, or midway to the top of the precipitous rocks that formed the amphitheatre into which the Little Slew led. In front of this opening ran a ledge of rock, several feet wide, and extending around the horse-shoe shaped wall like a balcony. Access was to be had to this narrow gallery only from the cave, and the mouth of the tortuous passage that led to the Crow's Nest was several hundred feet down the ravine, well concealed in a jagged niche of rock over which the matted grape vines hung like a curtain. The Little Slew debouched into a wider one, the Big Slew, and this, in turn, carried the waters from the amphitheatre into Skidd's Branch. Both ravines were narrow and winding, and the Little Slew was well nigh impassable, even in summer. It was barely fifty feet wide and changed its direction among the abrupt rocks a dozen times before it brought the explorer in sight of the Crow's Nest.

At the time Darnley was threading his tedious way among the wet rocks of the Big Slew, all was activity in the Nest. From an opening above the main entrance, went a column of thin, blue smoke to mingle with the gray mists of the low-hanging clouds, and within fires were burning and torches flaring. Near the entrance a tall mountaineer with a broad-brimmed hat from which the rain dripped to his shoulders in little black streams walked on the parapet. His double barreled shot gun was thrown in the hollow of his left arm, and around his shoulders he held a rubber blanket like a Bedouin's mantle. He paced the ledge with the regularity of a sentry, save that he picked his way carefully over the loose fragments of rock on the gallery, as if he feared to make a noise and from time to time his eyes went scrutinizingly over the chasm below.

Within the scene was wierd. The gray light penetrated the rocky opening but feebly, and was vanquished by the smoky, red glare of the pitch pine torches ere it had more than touched the blackened arches that formed the vaulted ceiling. The cavern was low and wide and stretched away

on every side over benches of rock that were rounded by the action of the waters. The floor of these benches was nearly level, and like the cave itself, sloped gently down toward the black recesses the torchlight did not penetrate. On either side could be seen the entrances to countless crazy galleries that rambled away into the black heart of the hills above, and at the end of one of these there was a faint suggestion of daylight, as if the sunshine had once ventured down there and been strangled by some monster that inhabited the cave, and now only its ghost came back to haunt the place.

Now and then a waving flame would send a cohort of red rays to invade one of these recesses, and then would be revealed a grotesque array of gnomes and ghouls carved in spectral gypsum, or a long pendant of hibernating bats outlined against the white background that rosettes of the same material diapered into delicately arabesqued folds of stony drapery.

On one side there loomed out of the gloom a great copper boiler supported on a hearth of rough stone, and under this a fierce fire

was burning, the light from which was cut off by the flat slab of sandstone that did duty as a furnace door. The tarnished surface of the metal boiler caught the light from the torches and betrayed the outline of its domed head and long projecting beak in reflected bars of dull metallic lustre. Beside the furnace and supported on a higher shelf of rock were two or three barrels, in which the "worms" or coils of pipe where the vapor is condensed were cooled. The tanks were supplied with water by a hollow log that ran back some distance to catch the little subterranean streamlet that trickled from one of the many crannies in the rocky roof.

On the other side of the cave was a lot of half barrels that did duty as "mash tubs." Part of them were empty, and two half-naked negroes were measuring meal into them. A mountaineer in a dirty red flannel shirt stirred the fermenting contents of the other shift of tubs with a huge wooden paddle. In front of the furnace three men lay dozing comfortably on some meal bags, and another watched the "nose" of the "worm" from which the "singlings" or product of the first distillation was running

into a wooden butt. He caught some of the liquid and tested it with a small copper instrument from time to time, examining it critically by the light of his torch. The men at work spoke little, and the dull smothered bubbling of the boiler, the crackling of the coals and the splash of the running water were the only sounds within the cave that fell on the atmosphere heavy with the mingled aroma of the whisky and the tarry smell of the torches, save the patter of the rain at the entrance and the roar of the subterranean waters that came bursting out at the foot of the rocks.

A light glimmered down one of those narrow passages that led to the upper series of chambers like a pair of stairs, and a few seconds later the figure of a fat negro was visible. He stuck his torch in a crack of the rocks, and disappeared only to return with a couple of sacks, which he deposited on the rock bench, where his companions were at work.

"Dat's all ob de meal, Boss," he said, turning to the man at the worm who seemed to be in charge.

The moonshiner addressed made no reply,

but drew a fresh measure of "singlings" and as he did so the light fell on the face of Connie.

"I war pleased to 'serve dat dat war all ob de meal," continued the fat servitor.

"You d—n fool, do yer think we're deaf," said one of the recumbent figures sitting up. "Go put out that light."

"Why, Boss. I didn't mean no 'fense, I 'low'd you'd like fur—"

"Curse your everlastin' tongue, what the bloody h—l's th' matter with yer? Ef yer don't shut up I'll let the juice outen yer."

"Let the nigger alone, Bill, tain't none of your business to, fool with him; he's a talkin' to me, an' if I kin stan' it, you needn't put in yer mouth," said Connie.

The command was obeyed, for it was evident that the speaker was a man not to be trifled with.

After a few minute's silence one of the men at the tubs asked:

"How is it the Captin's let the meal git out!"

"Didn't have no time to run the mill. Had a d—n city chap there that says he's perspec-tin'. Captin thinks he's one of them d—n

Marshals, an' has been shadowin' him," answered Bill, sitting up and lighting his pipe. "It 'pears to me—it 'pears to me"—he continued, between the draws at the cob, "that he mought a found less trouble than that."

"How's that!"

"F—ist," and the speaker waved his pipe in close proximity to his jugular vein significantly.

"Your d—n right," rejoined the other. "I'd ha——."

But before he could finish the sentence a sharp report rang out on the murky air. In an instant all sprang to their feet; the torches were extinguished, and the men, guns in hand, crowded around the entrance.

"What was that?" asked Connie of the sentry.

Before he could reply another shot was heard.

"That was close to the Slew," said the sentry.

"'Bout time the Captin' war heah. I hope he ain't done got in no bad luck."

"That's a fact, Fatty. Bill you go down to the mouth and see what's up," said Connie

authoritatively. The man did as he was directed, and the others waited speculating meanwhile. They were not long kept in suspense, for, a few minutes after, Bill returned, accompanied by John Amburst.

"Well, Captain, what is it?" they asked hurriedly.

"That d—n Darnley; he's a Revenue feller. I found it out yesterday and had fixed to pink him last night, but the gal made a noise and I darn't. I laid for him in the Big Slew, but his d—n horse shied jest as I fired, an' he seed me an' shot back. Gim me a rag."

"What! yer hurt?"

"'Tain't much. I got it in the arm. Here Connie, you tie it up, and the rest of you git ready to go out arter him, for if he gits away its up with us."

No sooner was the order given than the men busied themselves with its execution. The fires were extinguished and the nest was left in charge of the negroes. Half an hour later, six men emerged from a mysterious opening among the rocks, and scattered through the woods.

Meanwhile, Darnley was struggling along through the underbrush that fringed the

creek. The copse into which he had plunged was composed of small shrubs and bushes entangled with vines. Dogwood and laurel interlaced their boughs so that in many places it was well-nigh impossible for him to force a passage except by patiently breaking away the obstacle, twig by twig. The water of the swollen stream was knee deep among the bushes, and the daylight faded fast.

The portion of the creek where he now was, is known as "The Narrows," and just above it is the "Big Eddy." Here where the stream makes a sharp curve, the character of its left bank changes. It had been a wall of rock that formed with the cliff at the foot of which Darnley stood, a narrow canyon, with a little causeway of earth on either side, covered with the tangled bushes through which he had passed with so much difficulty. Now the trend of the rock on the left was from the stream, and the bank widened out into a glade or bottom, filled with sycamores, birches and water hazel, which stretched back with a gentle slope to the hills, while the stream dashed its waters against a perpendicular wall of rock on the side where Darnley was.

As he approached the eddy he could see this dark shining pool, and hear the hoarse gurgle of the waters as they swirled among the rocks.

He came to a standstill.

Above him, on the right, the water widened into a pool that was now covered with floating debris, which sailed round and round as the waters were converted into a whirlpool by the friction of the tearing current that rushed by the foot of the cliff, and darted between him and the bank, scarce forty feet away, with the speed of a race horse, carrying on its tide huge logs and trees, and rolling along its bottom great masses of broken stone that had come from the ledges above. He knew to venture in this was to be swept away in an instant; it would have been like trying to swim a mill flume, or a wier. The water was waist deep where he stood, and rose each moment as the flood backed up, and the current was checked in the narrows below. The counter current was so swift that he was obliged to hold on to the bushes to keep his feet. It was impossible to turn back, for already the damned up flood was above the tops of the bushes, and a line of black water

formed across from wall to wall of the canyon.

It was now almost dark, and the torrents of rain increased as the shadows lengthened. The thick mist around him began to take fantastic shapes, and seemed like ghosts to his dizzy brain.

Still he stood, hoping vainly for aid. Life never seemed so dear.

The wind moaned drearily through the trees and the waters chuckled hoarsely at his despair. At last he called for help. "Help," came back from the woods mockingly.

"Help!" the rocks tossed it back again in derision, and the waters caught it up and laughed at it in mad glee.

He tried once more.

The mocking of the elements was too much for him. He wept. Then he felt it was unmanly, and resolved to meet his fate more worthily. He grew calm, and noticed now the water rose around his arm pits; calculating how long it would take to completely submerge him, and as the calmness of despair came he speculated whether he would be washed away by the current, or would only relax his grasp on the dogwood boughs when the black

water closed over his head, and as these, and a thousand other thoughts crowded upon his brain, he thought he heard a voice above the roar of the waters.

"I am mad," he said "Yes mad," and his loud, unnatural laugh rang out above the booming of the waters, a piercing cry on the ears of the night.

CHAPTER III.

ON DARNLEY'S TRAIL

A few minutes after the moonshiners had left the nest, they stood on the rubble in the ravine where Amburst's shot had so nearly cost Darnley his life. His horse lay drowned behind some of the rocks, a few feet further down. The poor animal had broken a pastern, and, unable to rise, had been drowned by the torrent in the gulley.

"Hadn't we better look into them things fust?" asked Connie, pointing to Darnley's saddle-bags, that were partially visible above the rapid, dirty water, as the men crowded around their chief.

"Well, bi'God, I like to forgot them, that's a fact. Bill, go fetch me them bags."

With some difficulty, Bill managed to exe-

cute this order, for between him and the talus where the horse lay, the water was both deep and swift; after a few minutes, however, the water-soaked contents of the bags were in the possession of the Captain. Some underclothing and toilet articles, and a few letters were all that rewarded the search. The first were appropriated by various members of the gang, the gully received the second, and the third John Amburst busied himself with. He deciphered the meaning of the letters with evident effort, for the ink had run and the words were blotted.

He found sufficient to confirm his suspicions as to Darnley's connection with the Revenue Department, however, in the printed heading of one of the letters. The envelope which contained this was plain, and he was turning it over carelessly, when two words in a hand he knew, arrested his attention. It was Helen's warning, and he greeted the discovery with a horrid oath. He saw it all now, and cursed himself for not having executed his design of the night before. Helen, also, came in for a share of all the oaths he could lay his tongue to.

"The gal ain't done no great harm, if we get

him," observed Connie, in reply to the last volley of imprecations.

"Ain't she?" sneered Amburst. "Well, I kin promise you one thing, she won't do no more."

"I kin promise that myself," answered Connie, and each looked at the other as if he read a hidden meaning in his words. After a minute Amburst led the way down the ravine to the Branch.

"He never crossed her here." Bill looked at the boiling waters all covered with yellow foam as he spoke. He was confident no sane man would try to stem such a current as now flowed through the ford. "He must a goed farther up," he added.

"That's what he did," said Connie who had been scrutinizing the bushes. "Look a thar at them elders, they's fresh barked, and bent as fur as you can see."

"Then he must a goed fur to cross at the Narrer."

"Could he a done it?"

"Not by a d—n sight. Look whar the water is; he's ketched 'twixt the Narrers and th' eddy."

"We'll go up on the cliff an' look fur him,"

said Amburst authoritatively, and the six turned into the Slew once more and moved up toward the Crow's Nest.

A few hundred feet up the ravine was a jagged fracture in the side of the cliff scarce two feet wide, and through this Amburst led the way. It opened into a water-worn passage that wound its way through the soiled rock like a staircase to a sink hole on the plateau above. By the time that the last man had squeezed himself through its rocky portal, the Captain had groped his way among the dark recesses and was emerging among the weeds and bushes on the top of the plateau, a hundred feet above. From this point they went to the brow of the cliff, and crept silently along toward the Narrows, to get within gunshot of Darnley.

Forced, as he was by the high water, to keep as close to the foot of the cliff as possible to get a foothold, the young man was frequently under the overhanging rock that in many places shelved in toward the bottom, and was thus out of sight of his pursuers, and thus concealed by rock and mist and rain

they passed him long before he was brought to a standstill by the swollen creek.

"We'er clean above whar he could a got an' it's too dark to see him anyway," said Connie as an hour later they stumbled among the loose rock in a ravine that debouched into the Branch, three miles above the Big Slew.

"What you think's become of him?" queried Amburst.

"He never could a crossed nowhar," asserted the sentry. "'Cause ther ain't no place befur you git to th' eddy, an' the water's been too high to pass that ever since the rain began; Jake tried it hisself."

"That I did," added Jake in corroboration. "I reckon then, he's drowned in the Narrars, Captin. That looks most likely," and Connie went down to the creek's bank as he spoke.

"I don't see myself, but that's whar he must be; it's too dark to find him now, anyway. I reckon we'd better git back an' be out bright in the mornin'. Havin' him drown's better than killin' him, anyway. How's the crick here, Connie?"

The latter, who had meanwhile examined the condition of the stream, called back that

it was fordable, and his five companions had soon joined him in wading the swift, but here only waist deep waters. By the time they had reached the hills on the other side it was quite dark, and confident that the object of their search was being hurried along to the turbid waters of the Chatter, the moonshiners picked their way in single file through the black forest, as only those who are born to wood craft can do.

When Connie had promised to deliver her message and was gone on his errand, Helen felt a sudden relief from the tension her mind had undergone during the morning when John Amburst's stealthy footsteps across the room had wakened her in the darkness. She knew his errand to the loft, and she knew also how natural must be her method of defeating his purpose, if she would have his suspicions concerning her unaroused. Her woman's wit had served her then, and she felt a secret satisfaction in the fact that her winning way was serving her now. Connie was her slave, fettered with chains of partly his own forging, 'tis true, but faithful she knew he would be. Through him she had held Amburst at bay, through him she would save

Darnley, through him her dreams of freedom would be realized. It gave her infinite satisfaction.

Connie had been gone an hour when the rain began to fall and still Darnley had not returned. She knew he would not let her advice go unheeded; had it come too late?

Noon rolled up, and still no sign of Darnley. She tried to forget how long the time was seeming and busy herself with the household tasks she shared with Polly. Their simple meal was over and the two women sat in silence before the fire while the rain fell in torrents on the old mill roof. Helen leaned her head against the stone fireplace wearily, and Polly nodded over her coarse knitting.

At last the girl could stand it no longer; she went to the door and looked out toward the ravine. The water in the branch, rising had covered half the talus at the foot of the cliff and the tall weeds were shaken by the current that poured on to the dam. As she listened wearily to the falling rain she started suddenly. Above the noise of the waters she heard a shot. To her trained ear it was distinct, and perhaps more audible because it was not unexpected. Another followed it. The girl

hesitated but an instant, then catching up her cloak, she gathered it around her and went out into the pouring rain. Having scrambled up the ragged path along the cliff she struggled through the dripping thickets.

This was three or four hours before Darnley had taken refuge under the shelving rock and was endeavoring to find a ford on the Branch. How little he then thought of the fate that awaited him in the black pool above the Narrows! He seemed now to have lived an age since that shot was fired in the ravine. Each struggling step he had made among the tangled brushes on the stream bed was a stage in his journey that accompanied as it was with the indelible photograph fear makes on the mind seemed to have occupied months in its accomplishment. And now as he looked back on them all, to his disordered brain their succession was inverted and the past was before him in a sort of perspective, a rough and perilous path that stretched up to the bright time when he held Helen's hand at the mill door. He felt his body growing weaker. His cramped fingers locked on the weeds, seemed loosening, and he was content to let the waters win the fight.

Suddenly he experienced a singular transition of feeling that seemed miraculous. It was as though he had been touched with a magician's wand; and his weakness vanished. He had heard a voice. It was not the mocking of his disordered brain, for he recognized it, and his every sense was sent astir and astart. In the very recognition there came to him a proof of his madness, for it was Helen's voice. But he answered, and he heard it again. Again he called; this time the answer was directly opposite.

The brave girl had risked the storm and the torrent for his sake.

The thought gave him new life. She was only a little way off under the trees on the other side--she was there to save him.

He must, he would be saved.

But how?

In the dim light he could see the outline of the tree where she stood. It was a birch, graceful even without its foliage, as it overhung the stream. Its branches stretched across the narrow band of gray that was the last trace of daylight. His eye followed their outline, and almost mechanically, he noticed one that nearly spanned the stream.

Like a flash the thought came to him. "Climb on that limb—climb on it—bend it down. I will catch it "

Helen comprehended, and lost not an instant. The tree slanted so that it was with little difficulty the brave girl cautiously crept on the limb. Foot by foot she advanced; inch by inch the pliant limb bent under her weight and dipped its branches into the stream.

Darnley moved out of the bushes slightly still clinging to the dogwood. The limb was but a foot away, and a little below him. He made a spring and caught the branch and the waters tried to wrest it from his grasp, but he held on, and drew himself up beside her.

He was saved, and a minute after they stood on the sloping hill on the other side of the stream.

Darnley took her in his arms and neither spoke. The joy of one and the deliverance of the other were too great for words.

"Come," she said gently, after a minute, "we are not safe here, the water is still rising, and already the narrow neck that connects this with the house must be nearly covered."

Slowly they groped their way through the

darkness, guided by the roar of the dam, until, at last, they stood before the old mill.

How changed was the scene! In front, the narrow river, swollen by the mountain torrent, had risen until its steep banks were filled to the brim with a cold current that caught the rays of cheerful light from the mill windows, and, in spite of their struggle, carried them down the stream with resistless force, to drown in the black waters. On the right was the mouth of the "Branch," now a great whirlpool filled with logs, and trees, and other floating debris of the woods. The waters that poured over the dam kept up a constant roar, and above the din could occasionally be heard the dull plashing of the great logs as they washed down from the lumber camps. It was such a spring tide as the Chatter had not seen for many a year, and the old mill trembled at the waters that thundered through its flume and out the overflows.

Darnley and Helen stopped a few seconds to listen to the roar of the mad waters, and then went into the house. Polly was not there, but a bright fire burned in the chimney, and its light danced out to welcome them. Drenched and shivering as he was, Darnley

took pleasure in it only, because its light enabled him to see Helen's face once more. He drew her before the fire, and took both her hands in his, and, as she looked up, her hood of dark cloth fell back. The rain drops in her auburn hair caught its color, and glistened like gold in the firelight. As their eyes met, her face grew radiant, and he read there the devotion that had prompted her heroism. Then came over him afresh the perils of the hour before, and he remembered with shame, that in his eagerness to save the life, that now in comparison with hers, seemed so unworthy, he had forgotten that which, but a few nights before, he had promised never to forget, and he felt unworthy. It may have been that Helen read his thoughts for she said simply, "I know that you love me, dearest," and it filled his heart with a great calm. In rapture he clasped her to him, and a prayer of gratitude went up unspoken, while outside the din of the waters seemed to him to modulate into a chord of solemn sweetness in keeping with the holiness of her heart.

As Helen and Darnley, passed across the staging that connected Amburst's house with the mill, six shadows glided around an angle

of the rocks, a few hundred yards down the Chatter, and, as the young man opened the door, the light that streamed from it, brought both their figures in strong relief against the black night.

Amburst saw them and gave a signal that caused his five companions to stand as motionless as the rocks about them.

"By God, we have him now," he whispered hoarsely, and then throwing his gun where it would not chafe his bandaged arm, he crept stealthily forward, followed closely by the others, Connie keeping but a few feet behind the leader.

They advanced with the utmost caution, picking their way over the rough stones as noiselessly as though there was no roaring of the dam and thundering of the logs in the stream to drown their footfalls.

Amburst crept up to the window and looked in. Darnley stood with his back toward him, in front of the fire, and Helen was in his arms. As she looked up in her lover's face, her profile was limned with Rembrandtic effect. The firelight fell on her snowy throat, and struggled with her golden hair for permission to kiss the curves of her delicate ear,

and then went romping away over the graceful outlines of the lithe figure that was betrayed by her tight fitting flannel dress, now that her cloak had fallen from her shoulders.

The sight filled John Amburst with the bitterest hate.

This was the woman he loved.

Twenty years before, he had snatched her from her mother's arms, in broad day-light, and had abducted her for the sake of a reward he had never received. For years he had kept her secreted, and, at last brought her to the mill. Then it was her loveliness stirred the passion blackened thing he called a heart. He had told her, and she had spurned and defied him, and now, there she stood in the arms of the man who had it in his power to put him in a felon's cell.

The hot blood coursed through his veins, and his heart gave a mad leap of cruel exultation, as he thought of his revenge.

He leveled his gun and took deliberate aim at both.

Then the hammer fell, but ere the heavy charge of buckshot left the barrels, Connie's out-stretched arm had thrown up the weapon, and the balls buried themselves in the mill

roof, as a cloud of dense smoke obscured the lovers.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE WASTE OF WATERS.

Half deafened by the report, and blinded by the sulphurous smoke that obscured all objects about them, Darnley clasped Helen closer to his breast. The bravest arms and the stoutest hearts are often spell-bound by a sudden shock, and with the shot still ringing in his ears, he was too dazed for a moment to comprehend precisely what had happened. He knew only that Helen was there, and the consciousness of her presence gave him strength, as his mind struggled to regain its equipoise. He did not realize the risk she incurred in remaining at his side, for we are not apt to fear for the fearless when they are companions in danger, and so soon as he was able to grasp the situation, his brain busied itself with plans for defense or escape, and with eyes that were straining to pierce the smoke, he retained her in his arms with an almost mechanical embrace.

Upon Helen the report had a different effect. She knew too well from whence it

came, and her woman's instinct told her, not only that it was designed she should share the fatal effects of the shot, but it told her why also. She read in that heavy reverberation an abandonment of the hellish purpose which John Amburst cherished against her, and a determination to be avenged for his thwarted passion with her death. She comprehended, too, that she might suffer a worse fate now that he had not been avenged, and for a moment her sense of woman's weakness overwhelmed her, and with the awful dread that, despite all, her purity might be sullied with a stain deeper than the crimson tide that coursed her veins, she wished that both had died in one another's arms.

Then she thought of Darnley, and the abiding strength of her woman's love welled up. It nerved her for the struggle that she knew must now come, and she turned toward the opening door where the rude casement framed the fierce, fire-lit face of John Amburst against the black, rain-wet breast of the night. She felt the hate in his every feature, felt it rushing through her fibres. She

knew she trembled in Darnley's arms as they stood waiting their fate.

How still it seemed.

The fire burned with a diminished light, the roar of the waters, the patter of the rain, and the booming of the ponderous logs, softened, faded, disappeared, and the quick, short breaths that came from their heaving chests died away, as the matted hair, the unshorn visage, and the wild eyes of the moonshiner slowly protruded from between the oaken lintels.

He bent forward, and his eyes kindled with mingled hate and revenge. Then he came in, followed by his gang.

The floor seemed to give no sound under their feet. Amburst glided rather than stepped, and, as he saw them motionless before him, his rage grew hotter, and he quivered like the air above the wheatfields under a blazing summer sun.

Then his lips grew foul with curses for both.

But what was that Amburst saw?

The stream of oaths on his lips was checked at the sight of a still blacker one that came bubbling up through the floor.

From every crack it rose like a seam of tar, and spread like a night cloud to every side.

The bright coals were borne up by it, and hissed out their affright; and, as the darkness came settling down about them, the moon-shiner felt the icy grasp of the water around his ankles.

"My God, the dam has broke!" he screamed in terror.

He no longer thought of the lovers, who, realizing the catastrophe, were struggling up the rude ladder at the other end of the room; nor of his panic stricken companions, clinging to each other in despair, at the death that rushed upon them.

How could he escape the flood?

A wall of water, waist deep, rolled through the open door, and tossed its foaming crest toward the rafters in defiance of the rival currents that had now forced in the sashes, and were roaring through the windows.

He felt the floor move.

As the rushing torrents swept him from his feet, the old mill left its foundation, a crushed and broken ruin, and its fragments clung together in fatal fellowship on the bosom of the flood.

Fighting and struggling against the black billows that closed over his head, he was borne away, and the watery thunder rumbled in his ears, as he saw the great black arches of the river.

Then there came a fearful sinking, a flash of light, an agony of fear, and the swift current rolled the body of the Captain among the rocks.

Amid the din of the wrecking flood, Darnley, unconscious of the moonshiners' fate, had struggled to the loft of the mill with Helen in his arms, and, as the underpinning washed out, and the old and rotten timbers parted, he had clasped a portion of the grinding mass of ruin. What it was he knew not, but both had found a lodgement on the wreckage, and, clinging to the drifting fragments, were borne out on the teeming flood.

So sudden had been the giving away of the dam, and the coming of the flood, so rapid its fearful destruction, and so like a dream their half helpless clinging to the flotsom, that the thread of ordinary association was broken, and the lovers drifted out into the surging Chatter, too dazed to realize their escape, too dizzy to think of consecutive events.

They held on to the bolting frame,—for this it was that bore them up—and clung to each other, and thus they were borne on, dimly conscious of where they floated—intensely conscious of the death that stared them in the face.

After a while they managed to climb up on their rude craft, and find a place to rest their feet. Part of a plate, with a bit of broken stanchion projecting from it was wedged in the frame, and they locked their arms around this spar, and each other, and, numbed with the icy water, sank into a state of semi-consciousness of their physical suffering.

Thus they seemed, on that swift current, to overtake the lagging hours of the night, and hurry toward the cold dawn that came streaming out of the clouds of mist, gray and careworn, as if it felt the routine of another day a burden.

Scarcely a word had been spoken since the catastrophe, for in the darkness they had experienced an awful, and dread expectancy of the death that might come, without warning, at any minute, that kept their minds under a fearful tension. Now the light, faint as it was, brought relief.

They could see the dim outline of the steep mountains on either bank, and the ragged rocks that leaned far out into the swift current, seeking to wreck their frail float, and later, the growing light showed them where the snags lifted their water hooded heads to abet any cruelty the cold river might perpetrate.

The rain had ceased, and the clouds, reluctantly parting, at last showed a flush of color, and the day revived as if from a faint.

Darnley noticed all this mechanically, and then he turned his face towards Helen, and their lips quivered as their eyes met.

"Darling," he said passionately, "Darling, we are saved!"

The girl gave a low cry, and then controlling herself said despairingly; "You don't know the river. Listen!"

There was something in her face that gave a new meaning to a sound that had been growing more distinct each moment. Half comprehending her, he asked hoarsely, "What is that?"

"The falls."

"God help us!"

The words came like a groan, and drawing

her closer to him, he let the feeble ray of hope die in his bosom.

Then the sun came up, and the fog, rolled away by the soft breezes, revealed the hills distinct in their wildness. It was a landscape of desolation, yet peopled with all the weird caricatures of nature.

Mocking, snow-bound faces peeped from among the trees; sneering profiles of seamy rock looked down from rugged parapets, gaunt hands beckoned or pointed in derision, and the skeletons of a summer's verdure shook the drops from their fantastic forms under the morning sun. Ahead the river bellied out and a line of drifting debris at right angles with the bank showed the junction of another tributary.

The current here became less swift and the counter currents dallied with the timbers on which the voyagers floated. At last one more valiant than his fellows seized the bolting frame and bore it in triumph toward the shore.

The main current is too busy receiving and stowing away its additional freight from the Slew to miss it, and the frame is carried close to the bank. Both passengers found

new life in the prospect of deliverance, and as the raft comes within a few feet of the overhanging bushes, Darnley held Helen more firmly and stretched out his stiffened hand to grasp the twigs.

The treacherous current chuckled exultingly as it bore them swiftly out to the stream once more. Again and again this is repeated until his brain is weary and hope is gone. He closes his eyes from sheer exhaustion, and the current laughs in derision as it bears him once more toward the shore to tempt his feeble power, but he does not heed, and it slowly tows them to an eddy until he revives.

The frame has stopped, but all is blank; both are unconscious.

What is this?

A sickening consciousness of being—the far away sound of voices—light faces—

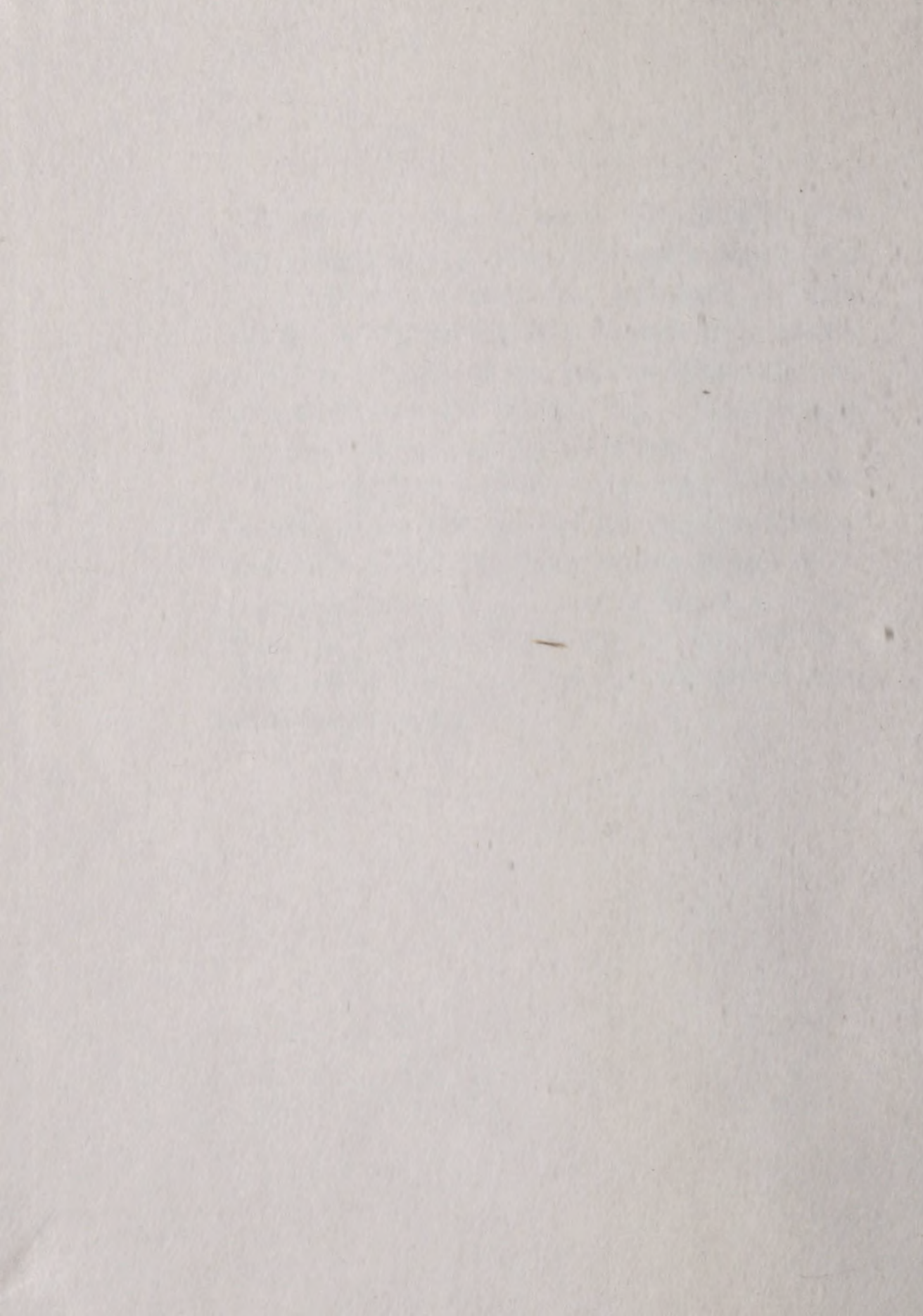
“We are saved, Helen! we are saved!”

Rough, hearty voices reply, and strong hands lifted them, but neither knew until hours after, who their deliverers—the hardy wood-choppers of a camp on the lower Chatter—were.

A year has elapsed since the Crow's Nest was destroyed by the Marshal's posse, and John Amburst's mill has not been rebuilt. Yet the mouth of Skidd's Branch is to have a resident, for part of the year at least, and even now workmen are putting up a simple cottage near the site of the old house.

Judge Gilbert's silver locks are blown by the soft June breezes as he caresses the auburn hair of the daughter whose image only, so long gladdened his lonely heart, and Edward Darnley smiles serenely as he puffs his Havanna to the hills that are to watch over his summer home.

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